

Life After Wheelabrator

Where will our trash go??

At some point – hopefully sooner than later – Baltimore’s largest air polluter, the aging, privately-owned, Wheelabrator Baltimore trash incinerator, will close down. There is life after Wheelabrator.

Baltimore is fortunate in that it has its own publicly-owned landfill: Quarantine Road Landfill (QRL). Most cities have to rely on private facilities outside of their borders to take their trash. One major difference between public and private facilities is that public ones can choose not to take trash from outside of their borders.

Where will Baltimore’s trash go if Wheelabrator closes? The city’s own landfill.

But aren’t landfills bad? Yes. Of course. However, there’s a landfill at the end of the picture no matter what. We have three main options:

1. Direct landfilling (bad, but better than incineration)
2. Incineration → toxic ash to landfill ([most polluting and expensive](#) option)
3. Zero Waste with Material Recovery & Biological Treatment before landfill ([best option](#), economically & environmentally; avoids having gassy, stinky landfills)

Landfills are bad, but incinerators are worse. For every 100 tons burned in an incinerator, 30 tons become toxic ash that go to the landfill. The other 70 tons become air pollution. It’s not the size of landfills that is harmful, but the toxicity. Ash makes landfills more toxic.

Won’t the landfill fill up faster if we don’t burn? Yes, but not by much because we no longer have to take other people’s trash and ash – and we can and must reduce waste!

- 1) We no longer take Harford County’s incinerator ash. This was 10% of the tonnage accepted at QRL from 2007-2015. It stopped after the incinerator closed in 2016.
- 2) Baltimore is already reducing its waste. The city’s waste generation fell 11% from 2016 to 2017, which reduced waste going to Wheelabrator by 6%.
- 3) In 2017, only 53.6% of Wheelabrator’s trash came from the city. The other 46.4% was imported from Baltimore County, 5 other MD Counties, and 8 other states.
- 4) Baltimore County provides 40% of the trash burned in Wheelabrator, and their waste plan is to continue burning in Baltimore rather than use their own landfill.
- 5) QRL is filling up with ash from imported trash. Only starting in 2014 did Baltimore County start taking some of the ash back to their own Eastern Sanitary Landfill in

White Marsh. However, they're supposed to be taking their share and they never have. See:

	Baltimore County's share of waste burned in Wheelabrator Baltimore	% of Wheelabrator's ash returned to Baltimore County
2005	38%	0%
2006	17%	0%
2007	16%	0%
2008	24%	0%
2009	26%	0%
2010	34%	0%
2011	28%	0%
2012	35%	0%
2013	37%	0%
2014	37%	10%
2015	36%	23%
2016	38%	30%
2017	40%	30%

- 6) How much faster will it fill up? If we do nothing to reduce waste, and use the city's landfill only for city use, we'd be sending 5% more tonnage to the landfill over 2017 levels. 2017 levels were high due to a huge amount of soil dumped there. Compared to the 5-year average (2013-2017), it would be a 39% increase. Easily compensated for by reducing waste appropriately....
- 7) The city passed a polystyrene ban, and could continue to ban problematic materials like single use plastics, reducing waste.
- 8) Composting food scraps and yard waste can reduce waste 25-30% while also avoiding landfill gas generation that contributes to odors and global warming.
- 9) Recycling has a long way to go in the city. The city distributed free large green trash cans, but charges for small yellow recycling bins. This is completely backwards. As our Divert Baltimore pilot showed, simply providing free recycling bins, some basic education, and a financial incentive can dramatically boost recycling rates. Much can also be learned from other cities on how to boost recycling and composting participation.
- 10) An expansion of the Quarantine Road Landfill is already in the works, and has been going through permitting processes with the state for some years now.
- 11) In the worst case scenario – that the QRL expansion isn't ready before the current landfill fills up (which is more likely if the city continues to drag its feet on recycling and composting efforts) – waste could temporarily be shipped through transfer stations to landfills in VA and PA. This is already happening: 9% of Baltimore City's trash was shipped to landfills in 2016, and 3.3% was in 2017. In 2017, five transfer stations used by the city shipped waste to eight landfills in VA, PA, and MD.